Flying Kyoto-friendly skies

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by Sarah Locke

Let's say that you have been a Kyoto convert for years.

The Kyoto Protocol, the United Nations climate treaty designed to cut greenhouse gas emissions, has only been in effect for 2 days, but maybe you've been committed to its goals for much longer. You've been turning down your thermostat, car-pooling when possible, you've even replaced that inefficient refrigerator in your kitchen.

So, you're green, right? You're doing your part to burn fewer fossil fuels and help Canada reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 6 percent below 1990 levels within seven years. This means reducing the emissions we produce today by about a quarter.

Travellers can now make their trips "carbon neutral" by buying carbon offsets.

Well, when you live in the North, it is far too easy to blow your yearly carbon budget by hopping aboard an airplane.

Carbon dioxide is the main greenhouse gas produced by burning fossil fuels, and even a relatively short jaunt to Vancouver pumps out about a half-tonne of carbon per passenger. Flying to Ottawa for a meeting? Your carbon load for the round trip flight is more than a tonne.

The average Canadian produces more than 5 tonnes of greenhouse gasses such as carbon dioxide per year. That is enough gas -- by volume -- to fill five two-storey, three-bedroom houses.

For many Yukoners, flying is often the only practical way to visit relatives, and our long winters can stir up an overwhelming urge to escape to a warmer climate for awhile. Also, government employees, who make up the majority of the work force, regularly hop on planes to attend meetings in other parts of the country.

Air travel is considered to be the world's fastest growing source of greenhouse gas emissions, and the amount of travel is expected to double in the next 15 years. While the fuel efficiency of planes has increased tremendously over the last few decades, it has not kept pace with the boom in the total number of kilometres being logged per

year by air travellers.

Air travel is also cheaper than ever, and the reality is -- people are going to keep flying. So what is a conscientious consumer to do?

Many organizations -- both private and non-profit -- are offering ways that travelers can remain "carbon neutral" while travelling by purchasing carbon offsets. These green measures are aimed at balancing out greenhouse gas emissions by planting trees, installing solar heaters, or taking other measures that reduce the amount of carbon being pumped into our atmosphere.

Many websites are making this practice easy. Future Forests, a British company, has an online calculator that estimates how much carbon dioxide your planned flight will pump into the air, and how many trees need to be planted to offset that amount.

For example, according to their flight calculator, purchasing two trees would make your round-trip flight to Ottawa carbon neutral.

The Tree Canada Foundation provides a similar service in this country, and estimates that the average Canadian tree will contain about 200 kilograms of carbon over an 80-year period in urban areas, and 225 kilograms of carbon in rural areas.

Carbon calculators will no doubt become more commonplace in the Kyoto era. Scandinavian Airlines already provides an emissions calculator for its own flights which computes emissions not only of carbon dioxide, but of other pollutants spewed out in jet contrails such as nitrogen oxides.

However, the world of carbon offsets is far from exact, and the remedies not always clear. Planting more trees might sound like an obvious solution, but -- as some critics have pointed out -- what if the trees burn up in a forest fire, releasing the carbon dioxide back into the atmosphere?

Measuring carbon loads is also confusing. In some cases, flying might be more environmentally benign than driving; it all depends on the efficiency of your vehicle, the number of passengers and a host of other factors.

But driving and flying both produce greenhouse gasses which trap heat from the sun, and temperatures are expected to rise more in the North than in southern regions because of climate change. From the spruce bark beetle infestation in the Kluane area to last summer's forest fires, Yukoners have already had a taste of life in a warmer world.

So, if you want to buy your way out of carbon guilt, more and more companies are offering a wide range of options. In Canada the Pembina Institute for Appropriate Development enables people to purchase wind power certificates to compensate for the electricity required to run their computers.

Commuters can offset the greenhouse gasses produced by their cars every year by buying a TerraPass through Benven LLC. The American company buys carbon credits on the Chicago Climate Exchange, a commodities organization whose members have committed to reduce greenhouse emissions.

At the government level, Environment Canada's Atlantic Region has produced a technical guide for "Greening Meetings," which encourages government departments to reduce or mitigate business travel with "carbon neutral conferencing."

In the era of Kyoto, no doubt many more such initiatives will appear, and counting carbon credits might become as normal as counting calories. Listed below are just a few of the resources available on carbon offsets:

Tree Canada Foundation: www.treecanada.ca
Pembina Institute: www.pembina.org
Future Forests: www.futureforests.com/calculators/flightcalculatorshop.asp
Chicago Climate Exchange: www.chicagoclimatex.com
Environment Canada Carbon Neutral Conferencing:
www.ns.ec.gc.ca/greenman/index.html